

## **“Baptism: A Promise for You” based on Acts 2:14, 36-45, and Psalm 16**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, April 23, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

While he may be best known for his Narnia Series, with the first in the series, “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,” my favorite books by C.S. Lewis are his space trilogy. The protagonist in the series is a character named Ransom, who is a philologist. Now, if you don’t know, a philologist studies the history of languages, particularly how they are used in literature.

Lewis’s close friend J.R.R. Tolkien was by trade, a philologist and a professor at Oxford before he wrote his classic works of fiction, including the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings. Can you imagine the conversations between these two. For Lewis loved and studied languages too, and the character Ransom was a combination of them both.

In the first book, “Out of the Silent Planet,” Ransom is kidnapped and taken to Mars. On this planet, there are three sentient species, each gifted with the power of reason. In their language, these creatures, and humans or any other sentient being are called, “hnau.”

And so, on Mars, or, “Malacandra,” as they call it, there are three types of hnau. There are the Hross, who are beaver-like hunters and poets, and then there are the Sorns, which are tall, thin abstract thinking creatures with long limbs. Lastly, the Pfiltriggi are frog-like, and love to make things that are useful. All three are ruled by a fourth being, an angel-like creature called Oyarsa.

Ransom is kidnapped by a philosopher scientist named Weston who wishes to save humanity, and his partner is Devine, has money to back Weston and is looking to add to his wealth. They bring Weston because the Oyarsa said it wanted to meet another human. Weston and Devine believe themselves superior to all other creatures, and so, they assumed these other hnau are primitive in nature. They thought that surely all they wanted the new human for some kind of sacrifice.

Ransom escapes when they land on Mars and he is afraid when the Hross find him. But he takes the time to learn their language, and ask about their societies and species. He starts off very suspicious because he can’t believe these beings live at peace on this planet.

In Ransom’s conversations with these fellow hnau, he must translate English to their language. Lewis does a great job conveying this, but not by inventing another language like Tolkien might have. Instead, he simplifies complex statements into basic English, the kind of English someone just learning, or the language a child might speak. In doing so, Lewis picks up on something in our Acts passage today. Ransom and the hnau never use a word for “sin,” but instead refer to things as “bent.”

In our passage today, Peter speaks to the people, saying, “Be saved from this bent generation.” The word translated “bent” here is skolios, as in scoliosis, a condition of a crooked spine. The word literally means “bent” or “crooked,” but unlike Ransom and his translation, most translators try to convey a figurative meaning for the word. And so, in the KJV it starts out as “untoward,” and that is similar. But then in other translations, it becomes “perverse” or “corrupt” in other versions. All these are accurate, but we have our own ideas now of what we think counts as perverse or corrupt, and what qualifies as perverse or corrupt.

Yet, I believe Lewis is on to something in his trilogy, seizing on this word used four times in the New Testament. In its simplicity, to be bent is not broken or irredeemable – It can always be bent back. However, likewise, something that is bent can look like it is in good condition. Yet that bend actually points it in the wrong direction, away from God.

You see, if we translate this as perverse, we can see a bend, but decide in our own estimation that it is not really perverse as I see it. And likewise, recognize that in some ideology we support, there may be a view that we think might be a little askew, but surely my ideology is not corrupt. Yet, a slight deviation misses a target, and the word for sin means, to miss the mark.

When Peter in his declaration says to “be saved from this bent generation,” he is speaking to people who think that while the world may be sinful, they are the ones on the right path. They are headed in the right direction. But Peter tells them that they are the ones who crucified Jesus.

This speech comes on the day of Pentecost, which we will celebrate in a few weeks, and it is not made to the crowd in Jerusalem that chanted “Crucify Him!” No, it is made to visitors, pilgrims from many lands who are in the house of Israel, but not necessarily the ones who actually crucified Jesus.

And so, Peter says that Jesus, the one born of Mary 33 years earlier, was made at that time to be both the Messiah, the anointed King, and the immortal Lord, the one and only eternal God of Israel, and still, the people crucified him. In truth, maybe we all did, by our own sin and our bent nature.

This convicts the people who hear this message, and their hearts were pierced by it, and their response is natural – Ok, so I believe, now what? What do we do?! Peter says to “Repent,” or literally, “Change your mindset,” and “Think differently.”

This is not a simple renunciation of what we have done that is wrong, though that is certainly part of what is going on here. This is about seeing things differently, through a lens of Jesus. We cannot truly renounce every single sin we commit, partly because we struggle to identify them. Sometimes that makes us look at other people instead, because it’s easier to try to identify all of their sins.

But Peter is telling the people to repent of their own sin, to change their mindset and put on the lens of the God revealed in scripture, it changes us. Where is our pride justified, if God humbled God’s self to be a human like us? Where is our use of power and dominance over others justified, when the eternal Son, while in our human flesh, did not overthrow his captors by force, but died for us, forgiving his crucifiers, and all who sin? How is lust or greed justified, when the Spirit of God, the very presence of our portion as the Psalmist says, all we need, dwells in and among us?

This is what brings us to repentance, because we know we lose sight of these things. We sin, and we sin again, missing the mark because we are bent and off target. But by repenting, renewing our mindset, focusing on this gospel reality, we right our direction, and we can stop making excuses for sin.

This is where the brilliance of Lewis comes in and shines light on our condition. Devine, the money man, is ultimately only after the “sun’s blood” as he calls it on Mars, or its gold. The Oyarsa says that he is broken, and has ceased to be a hnau, because he has given in to his most base animal instincts. He’s just a beast, but Weston, the Oyarsa said, is bent and therefore, had become evil. He can be bent back though, but if he is not, the damage he causes is worse than Devine’s impact.

This is because Weston has taken what is noble, a desire to serve and benefit humanity, and raised this good thing above all others, to the point that defending this one good may require the use of evil, such as killing Ransom, or offering him as sacrifice, or killing the Hross and other sentient beings, all to conquer and plunder another world, rather than fix his own world. True evil then disguises itself as virtue, as an angel.

We are in a bent age, a crooked generation, in this very sense Peter spoke of. Just as Rome justified war, crucifixion, and violence, to bring about “peace,” we today have just causes all over the political spectrum, for which some are willing to abandon every other virtue in order to defend one ideal. And so we have beautiful things like family, tradition, justice, and peace, all of which are good gifts given by God for us to enjoy, that become justification or the excuses we make, for acts of violence, bigotry, and exclusion, for selfishness, shaming, and division.

There is no justification for sin in defense of virtue. Our only justification is Jesus. Our only justification is that despite our sin, God’s love for us is so great that in Christ, the eternal Son of God, fully equal with the Father and Spirit, as One God came down and shared our humanity, to live within our human limits. In sharing our life, he died for us, but also, he rose for us, sharing the divine life, the inheritance that is solely his, making us adopted children of God. By this, we are temples of the Holy Spirit in and among us and be Christ’s hands and feet in the world.

So let us return to Peter’s message of the Resurrection that he is proclaiming. He says, “Be baptized, each and every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” This is not about getting people wet with water as we did Annie Kate today. This is about bringing people into community to share life with them and connect them. It is to keep them connected to Jesus through a common life, a shared experience and love for one another.

Peter says, “For to you is the promise, and to your children, and to all those at a distance, as many as the Lord our God shall call to himself.” The promise of God is for you, and it is for all of our children, but it is also to all those who are at a distance, far away from God, who may not be aware of God’s love, at this moment. And it is our calling, to share that love with them.

Baptism holds a promise for us, that we can be saved from this bent age, that we can participate in the community, the common life with each other, and encounter Christ in the breaking of the bread and through prayers, as we embrace the teaching of the Apostles about our Lord Jesus. For it is in our baptism we are sealed by the Holy Spirit, and it is in this promise, that when we die, we remember, that our baptism joins us to Christ’s death, and in doing so, joins us also to his resurrection.

Beloved, let us renew our mindset every opportunity we get, repenting of sins we know, but more importantly, turning ourselves back to the love of God we see in Christ, focusing on who Jesus is and what he has done for us. This is the love of God we see in our crucified savior and by this, we can share that love and all of its promises within our baptism.

When we turn to the Lord in this way, and lay aside excuses for sin, especially those sins we justify as necessary for a greater good. Remember, what the Psalmist said about our goodness – that it is nothing compared to the Lord. Jesus is our example, so let us grow in our common life with one another and rejoice in the presence of our God with us, which as the Psalmist says is the fullness of our joy. Amen.